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THE DECORATIVE IDEA IN ILLUSTRATION

BY ALEXANDER BLACK

With original illustrations by Otto Toaspern.



A SMILING WELCOME

gether an unfortunate result of the realistic movement and of the later movement for impressionism. Academic composition had become a hard-and-fast affair, and the whole theory needed a shaking-up. But, whatever there may be of logic in these scoffings at composition, we find evidence of no such attitude as against the decorative. Indeed, we are just witnessing the culmination of the decorative enthusiasm, originally inspired by Japanese art and transmitted by Beardsley, Bradley, *et al.* When all these exaggerations have spent themselves, the eternal fitness of the decorative idea in all art must still remain. There will survive the divergence of opinion as to the value of the decorative quality in painting, but this divergence will, I think, diminish more rapidly than there are present reasons for expecting.

However, it is in illustration rather

Most art-terms are elastic, but the term "decorative" is perhaps especially so. To include this term in the broader one, "composition," does not always seem practical, although a right use of the word composition should always, probably, be to this extent inclusive. Certainly in the average use neither word receives its full share of meaning.

It has become a sort of fashion I believe to scoff at composition. Perhaps this is not alto-



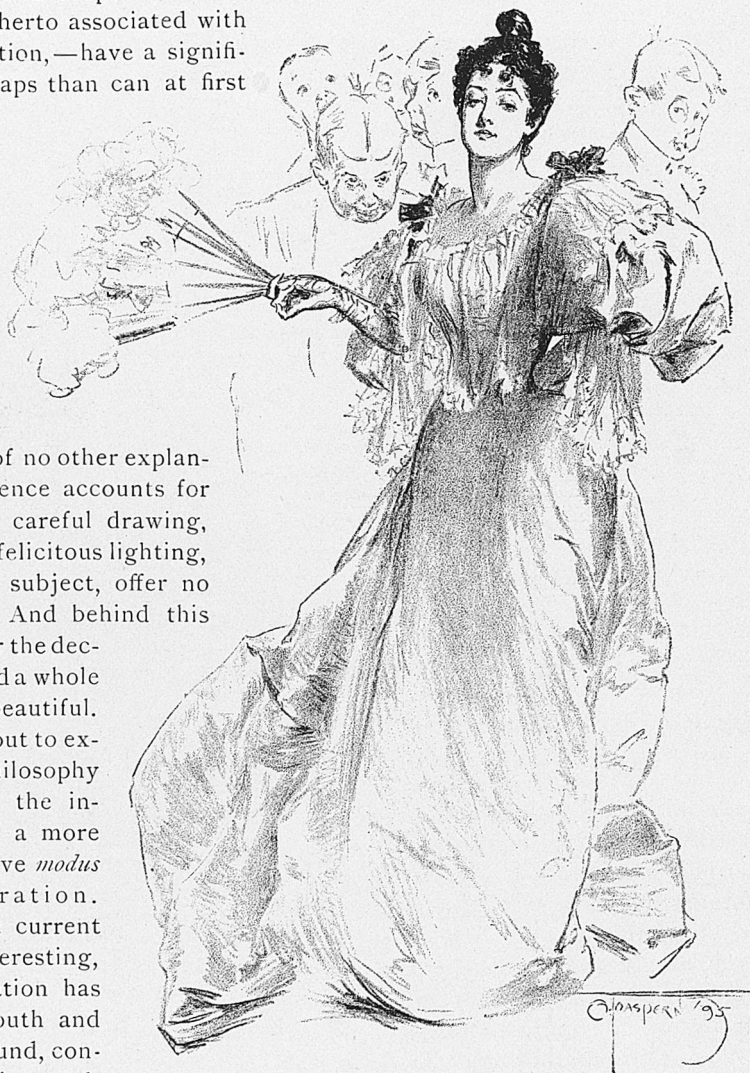
SKETCH FOR A SATYR IN THE PICTURE "MUSIC"

than in painting, that this quality is especially called into prominence. In painting there may be field for debate as to the relative force of color and of form, but in illustration the decorative scheme is essentially the dominating note. It is not considered good form to lay much stress on this fact in contemporary school-instruction, yet the fact is sufficiently plain. The charm of the decorative quality in illustration, its delightfully broad scope—broader than anything hitherto associated with academic composition,—have a significance deeper perhaps than can at first appear. If color in painting is analogous to harmony in music, line is something more than melody. The decorative ensemble answers craving in the eye. It explains fascinations susceptible of no other explanation, and its absence accounts for failures for which careful drawing, accurate and even felicitous lighting, and an appealing subject, offer no sign of excuse. And behind this natural craving for the decorative we shall find a whole philosophy of the beautiful.

I did not start out to expound any such philosophy but to touch on the interesting signs of a more natural and effective *modus* in current illustration. Everything about current illustration is interesting, because illustration has taken on a new youth and is just now in a jocund, confident and energetic mood, very enjoyable to look

upon, and bespeaking a vitality that promises great things. All the rising illustrators are animated by an obvious feeling that illustration is a form of art that has acquired dignity as well as use and interest, and their work belongs to the most enjoyable demonstrations that art is making to-day.

If we glance at the work of so excellent an artist in illustration as Otto Toaspern, we shall not be at a loss to discover signs of the modern spirit as that spirit mani-



A SKETCH FOR A SOCIETY-DRAWING



A SKETCH FOR A PORTRAIT

a new language. But Mr. Toaspern possessed this feeling in a degree so marked that he has quite evidently had no disadvantages to cope with while enjoying all of the strength that the painter's training gives to work such as the drawing to Tennyson's "Mariana." Possibly it would be difficult to find a more interesting evidence of the gift for painting, in partnership with the gift for illustrative translation, than is afforded by the sketch which Mr. Toaspern has made from his vigorous portrait of Percy Pitt of London. This portrait, notable for a simple strength that appears in all of Mr. Toaspern's portraits, is reflected for us here in a sketch that affords an excellent example of the decorative style. That this

festes itself in a strongly individual draughtsman. When Mr. Toaspern began illustrating he had the advantage and the disadvantage of thorough training as a painter. Illustrating in so lively a degree has a grammar of its own that the man who turns from the canvas to the distemper-drawing, or the more radically different pen-work, is often observed to be at a definite disadvantage. Unless his feeling for the decorative has been present in his work on canvas he is in a situation as provocative of labor as that of one who begins the study of



A SOCIETY-SKETCH

style is not in the least inimical to habits of close and deferential study of nature, appears quite plainly in Mr. Toaspern's work. The artist's sketches from nature are at once pithy and conscientious, touching saliences with alertness for the pictorial and something also of the philosophic.

In the style which he employs for direct illustration, Mr. Toaspern is as free from current mannerisms as any illustrator whose work I have seen. He unites spirit and delicacy in an original way, yet without exhibiting any of that affectation of individuality that mars so much ar



THE COQUETTE

tistic work that otherwise might inspire respect. The Toaspern girl is not like the Gibson girl or the Reinhart girl or any one else's girl, while her thorough modernness cannot be gainsaid. And here we find suggestion of one of the most essential qualities of the illustrator—he must know how to depict femininity, which is to say that he must understand femininity—no, not under-



UNCLE ZEKE, PHILOSOPHER

stand; we cannot ask so much in the matter of so complex a subject; —let us rather say, appreciate. Mr. Toaspern does seem to appreciate woman-kind at her best. His society-women are modish, but self-respectingly modish. They are not exactly the sort of women Mr. Paul Bourget regards as typically American, and I am glad they are not. The offending touch of hardness is not here.

A certain art-editor who was one day placing a commission in Mr. Toaspern's hands remarked, "This is a very difficult subject, Toaspern,



and you are the one to handle it—you draw

such decent women." At a time when both art and letters sometimes seem to be in a conspiracy to prove that the typical society-woman is *not* "decent" the comment is eloquent. There is, indeed, this charm in Mr. Toaspern's delineations of the American idol—they express a man's reverence as well as his enthusiasm. And this is always a pleasant thing to be able to say. It does not mean that the man who has the reverence may not appreciate fully the foibles of the sex. In fact no student of life who does not know women well enough to know her foibles as well as her strength, is at all likely to have a really fine sentiment of appreciation. Mr. Toaspern's pictures of womankind are real and forcible because they express the complete organism with a suggestion of those often baffling elements which the rash call contradictions, but in which the philosopher recognizes a human illustration of the circumstance in the grammar of our language that two negatives make an affirmative.

O TOASPERN
· HIS · BOOK



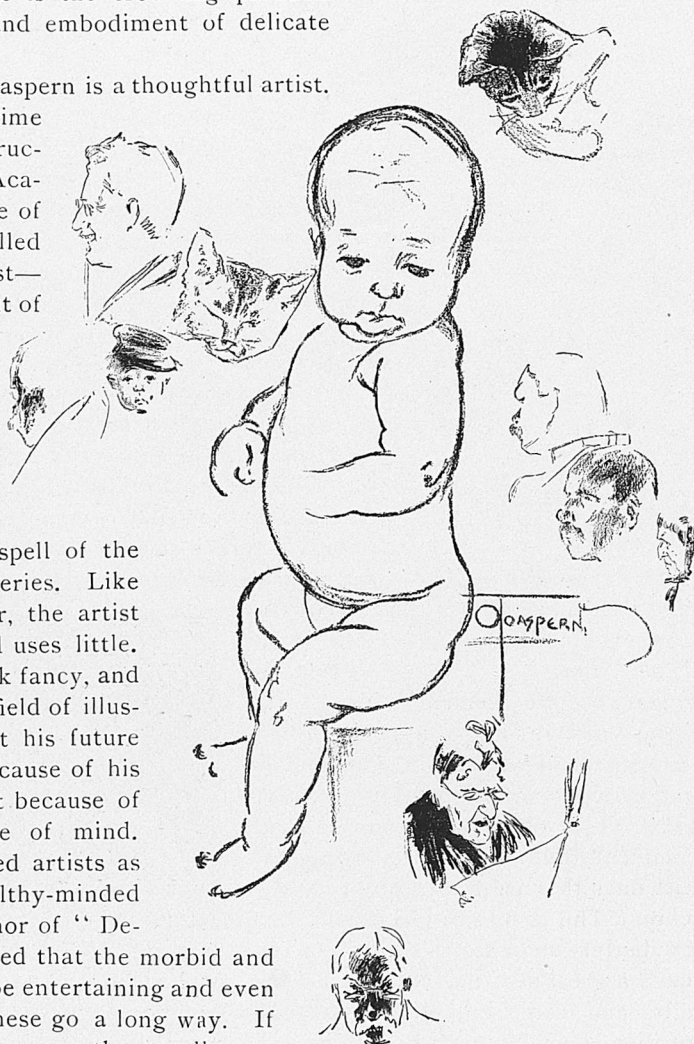
FIRST DRAFT FOR A DECORATIVE DESIGN

That Mr. Toaspern seizes quickly the essential difference in feminine types is shown in his picture "The Coquette." Here we find the rigor of pure propriety relaxed into something that still is conventional, perhaps, and not in defiance of the traditions of the fashionable ball-room, but with a cast that we recognize at once as appropriate to the often perplexing theme. "The Coquette!"—she has long been the mark of the cynic, the despair of the poet, and the bewilderment of the sociologist. She is the crowning paradox of her sex, the acme and embodiment of delicate devilment.

Quite clearly Mr. Toaspern is a thoughtful artist.

He preaches—for some time he was one of the instructors at the National Academy until the pressure of other obligations compelled him to relinquish the post—that no essential element of a picture is unworthy of the utmost study.

Yet his work is always broad, as befits the work of one who for four or five years in the most impressionable period was under the spell of the Munich schools and galleries. Like Hamlet with his dagger, the artist studies much detail and uses little. Mr. Toaspern has a quick fancy, and a healthy one. In the field of illustration I should say that his future is assured, not only because of his technical equipment but because of his wholesome attitude of mind. We want healthy-minded artists as much as we want healthy-minded writers. Even the author of "Degeneration" has admitted that the morbid and degenerate people can be entertaining and even useful. But a few of these go a long way. If they interest us it is because they really are exceptional, and because the foundations of our taste are in sane things. Thus it is unnecessary for us to take the morbid too much to heart, nor to worry for the safety of those who are not morbid. It is a happy circumstance, I think, that our best illustrators should so uniformly exhibit a genial and wholesome spirit. Their position is to-day so conspicuous and influential that it would be a calamity should impulse or any sophistry of demand have made the situation otherwise. Moreover, the relations between literature



UNSUSPECTING MODELS

and illustrative art grow increasingly intimate, and to each department of artistic activity the other's attitude of mind must become a matter of increasing importance. It would be a nice

question whether the writer was not quite as likely to be

affected by the spirit of the illustrator as would the illustrator by the spirit of the writer.

Certainly the illustrator never exerted so much influence as at the pres-

ent hour. But doubtless the student of analogies will find that the tone of modern writing and the

tone of modern illus-

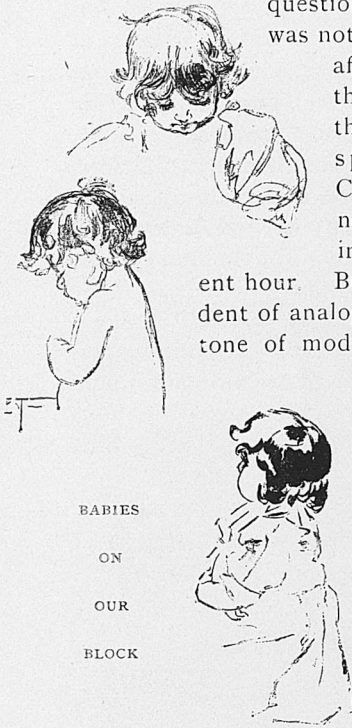
tration are, in common with those of all other arts, the reflection of the *zeit geist* which somehow manages to prevent discord. The time-spirit says to the artist, as it says to the writer, "Be brief." Hence the crisp touch that has been praised to the point of danger.

In a final word about the decorative idea it cannot be amiss to point out that methods of illustration must necessarily be distinctly various, and the art must determine for itself how far the partnership with type shall affect the prominence of

the decorative element. Ten or fifteen years ago we frequently heard the remark, "He is a clever artist, but he does not understand illustration." There still is occasion for such comment, but seldom in comparison with days that are not to be called remote. The mechanics of illustration are better understood—there is, indeed, a great deal that is distressingly glib; and command of the general manner is no longer rare. The immense gain in the accuracy and range of reproductive processes has of itself contributed amazingly to advancement in this department. The trite philosophy that there is peril in periods of great facility is a philosophy that we must heed at this time.



FROM A PORTRAIT OF PERCY PITT



BABIES
ON
OUR
BLOCK



"I AM AWEARY, AWEARY"—Tennyson's "*Mariana*"